

CHAPTER IV.

BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

“BETWEEN TWO FIRES.”

Happier is he who standeth betwixt the fire and the flood, than he who hath a jealous woman on either side of him.—*Fourth Veddah.*

THE single short drive on the Harrogate coach had re-awakened all Frank Onslow's dormant passion for the capricious and beautiful woman whom he had made his wife. His weak and pliant nature was one which could readily forget, and after a few weeks of dull pain his separation had ceased to be a grief to him, and he had devoted himself to the turf and the green table with an energy which had driven his matrimonial troubles from his mind. That Fenella had at the least been indiscreet in the case of the Count de Mürger was beyond all question. Further, she had allowed her indiscretion to be known and commented upon. Domestic unhappiness is ill to bear, but worse still is it to see pitying eyes turned upon one in society, to read snappy little two-edged paragraphs in gossiping papers, or in a club smoking room to see heads incline toward

each other while a swift malicious whisper passes from man to man. All this is bad to bear, and yet it had been Lord Francis's lot to bear it. It had soured his mind and hardened his heart at the time of his separation.

But every wound will heal, and this one also had skinned over. When in the morning he had seen the girlish figure of his wife perched upon the box seat, with her yellow hair curling from under the dainty hat, and looked into the hazel eyes which still shone with the old provoking, mischievous, challenging twinkle, he had felt his heart go out to her, and had loved her once more even as he loved her on that first night when he had plighted his troth to her after the garrison ball at Portsmouth. It maddened him now to find that, with all the fire of his love, he could not kindle any answering spark in her. Had she turned away from him, treated him coldly, or upbraided him for his conduct, then indeed he might have had hopes. A quarrel might lead to a reconciliation. But that she should treat him as an everyday acquaintance, gossip with him about trivial matters, and break small jests with him, that was indeed intolerable. In vain, through the long drive, he strove to pass the barrier. At every allusion to their married life, or to their quarrel, she either retired into absolute silence or else with quick feminine tact turned the conversation into other channels. If he had for-

given her there was no sign that she in turn had forgiven him.

And who was there who knew better than himself that there was much to forgive? If her name had been coupled with that of the Count de Mürger, had not his been equally and even more openly associated with the notorious Mme. Lucille de Vigny? He might have doubts as to his wife's guilt, but he could have none as to his own. If he had been subjected to the degradation of the pity of his fellow-men, had not she undergone as much or more? He remembered now with grief and compunction how day after day, and evening after evening, he had deserted his wife in favor of the society of the fascinating Frenchwoman. He remembered, too, how patient she had been at first. Then, how her patience had gradually changed to surprise, surprise to suspicion, suspicion to anger, and anger to revenge in the shape of the flirtation which had brought about the separation. Who was he, to blame her? He had himself been the first to sin. Now he was the first to forgive. Would she follow him in the one as in the other?

Alas! it seemed that she would not—that the breach was too broad to be ever again bridged over. Through the bright summer morning, as they rattled past the lines of beech trees, and through the pleasant Yorkshire lanes, he chafed and fretted, but in vain. His sin had been too

deep to be forgiven. As he handed her down, when they arrived once more at the Prospect Hotel, he pressed her little hands in his feverish grasp, and looked appealingly into her hazel eyes. There was no answering softness in their glance—nothing but amusement and something akin to contempt. He turned away with a sigh, and wandered slowly off in the direction of the gardens, walking with bent head, and the listless steps of a melancholy man.

Had his eyes not been downcast he might have noticed that he was not alone on the graveled, hedge-lined walk, which curved down through the pleasant Harrogate gardens. A woman was walking toward him, moving slowly through the rich yellow sunshine, and glancing from right to left with the air of one who is a visitor and a sight-seer. Her light cream dress, her dainty pink sunshade, and her broad shady hat, with its curling snow-white feather, made a pleasant picture to the eye, which was by no means diminished by her approach, for she was a woman of singular beauty. Though past her first youth, the lines of her figure were as graceful and perfect as an artist could desire, while her face, with its dark Southern beauty, its clear-cut, delicate features, and imperious eyes, spoke of a passionate and impetuous nature, such as is seldom to be found among our cold and self-contained Northern races.

Approaching from different ends of the walk the two had almost passed each other before Lord Francis looked up, and their eyes met. He sprang back with a cry of surprise, and of something approaching to dismay, while she stood quietly looking at him out of somber, deeply-questioning eyes.

"Lucille!" he gasped. "You are the last person whom I expected to see in Harrogate."

"But I am not surprised," she answered, speaking with a slight French lisp, which added a charm to her rich, deep voice. "I knew that you were in Harrogate. That is why I came."

"But why do you wish to follow me, Lucille? What good can come of it?"

"What good? All good. Is not love good? And do I not love you? Ah, Frank, you taught me to love you, and how can I unlearn it? It is happiness to me to see you and to speak to you."

"But see the misery that it has caused. We must part, Lucille. If you truly love me you will help me to retrieve my life, and not to wreck it further."

"Ah!" cried she, with a quick flash in her dark eyes. "You have seen her. You have been speaking with your wife again."

"Yes, I saw her to-day."

"By chance?"

"Yes, by chance."

"And you are friends again?"

"No, not friends."

"Ah, you wished it, but she would not have it. I can see it in your face. O Frank, how could you humble yourself to such a woman? How could you? To hold out your hand to her and to be refused! *Quelle dégradation!* See how she has treated you—she, who is not worthy to be the wife of any honest man."

The color sprang to Onslow's pale cheeks. It was one thing to know his wife's faults, and it was another to hear about them.

"That is an old story," he said curtly. "We may let that drop."

"An old story? Why, she was with De Mürger last week in London."

"Fenella was?"

"Yes, I saw them with my own eyes riding together in the Row."

Lord Francis started as if he had been stung. "Come here!" he said. There was a garden bench in a little recess, and he threw himself down upon it. Lucille de Vigny seated herself beside him, and a triumphant smile played over her dark and beautiful face as she marked with a sidelong glance the anger and chagrin which convulsed her companion's features.

"Is this true?" he cried.

"I tell you, Frank, that I saw them with my own eyes. It is not my custom to say what is not true."

"They were riding together?"

"Yes."

"And talking?"

"Talking and laughing."

"By heavens, I will see that fellow De Mürger. I will shoot him, Lucille. It is not our custom in England to duel. But he is a foreigner. He will meet me. I have wished to avoid a scandal, but if they court one why should I spare them? In the Row, you say?"

"Yes, and just when all the world was there."

"Heavens! it is maddening." He sank his face in his hands and groaned aloud.

"And what matter, after all?" said she, laying one delicately gloved hand upon his wrist. "Why should you trouble? What is she to you now? She is unworthy, and that is an end. *Tout est fini*. You are a free man, and may let her go her way while you go yours. Which way will be yours, Frank?"

The blood throbbed in his head. He felt her warm, magnetic hand tighten upon his wrist. Her soft, lisping voice, and the delicate perfume which came from her dress, seemed to lull the misery which had torn him. Already, in her presence, the fierce longing for his wife which had possessed him was growing more faint. Here was a woman, beautiful and tender, who did indeed love him. Why should his heart still dwell upon

that other one who had brought unhappiness and disgrace to him?

"Which way will be yours, Frank?"

"The same as yours, Lucille."

"Ah, at last!" she cried, throwing her arms about him. "Did I not know that I should win you back?"

A sharp cry, a cry as from a stricken heart, and a dark shadow fell between the pair. Lord Francis started to his feet. Fenella was standing in front of them, her hands thrown out, her eyes blazing with anger.

"You villain!" she gasped. "You false villain!" She put her hands to her throat, and struggled with her words like a choking woman. Lord Francis Onslow looked down, while the blood flushed to his temple. Mme. de Vigny stood beside him, her hands folded across each other, and a look of defiance and anger upon her face.

"I came out here to tell you that I had forgiven you. Do you hear? That I had forgiven you. And this is how I find you. Oh, I shall never forgive you now—never, never, never! Why were you so nice to me this morning, if you meant to treat me so?"

"One word, Fenella," cried Onslow. "Answer me one question, and if I have wronged you I will go down on my bended knees to you. Tell

me truthfully, and on your honor, were you in the company of De Mürger last week?"

"And if I were, sir?"

"Were you or were you not?"

"I was."

"You were with him in the Park?"

"I was."

"Then that is enough. I have no more to say. Madame, let me offer you my arm!" He walked past his wife with her rival, and the dresses of the two women would have touched had Fenella not sprung back with a cry of disgust, as one who shrinks from a poisonous thing. Mme. de Vigny laughed, and her proud sparkling eyes told of the triumph which filled her soul.

Fenella Onslow stood for an instant in the middle of the sunlit walk, her little right hand clenched with anger, her gaze turned toward the retreating figures. Then a sudden lurid thought flashed into her mind, and she started off as rapidly as she could in the direction of the railway station. Clitheroe Jacynth's train did not leave for ten minutes. Ronny had told her of the hour of his departure. The barrister was standing, moody and disconsolate, upon the platform, when he felt a light touch upon his shoulder, and looking round, saw a flushed little woman, with sparkling eyes, looking up at him.

"Fenella!" he cried.

"Yes, you must not go."

"Not go?"

"No, you must come back."

"You bid me?"

"Yes, I bid you. You must come back to the hotel."

"But it was you who this very morning drove me away from it."

"Forget it. Many things have happened since then. Will you not come?"

"Of course, I will come."

"Then give me your arm."

And so it happened that as Lord Francis Onslow and Mme. Lucille de Vigny stood at the door of the Prospect Hotel after their walk, they perceived Lady Francis and a gentleman whom neither of them had seen before coming toward them arm-in-arm, and engaged in the most intimate conversation.